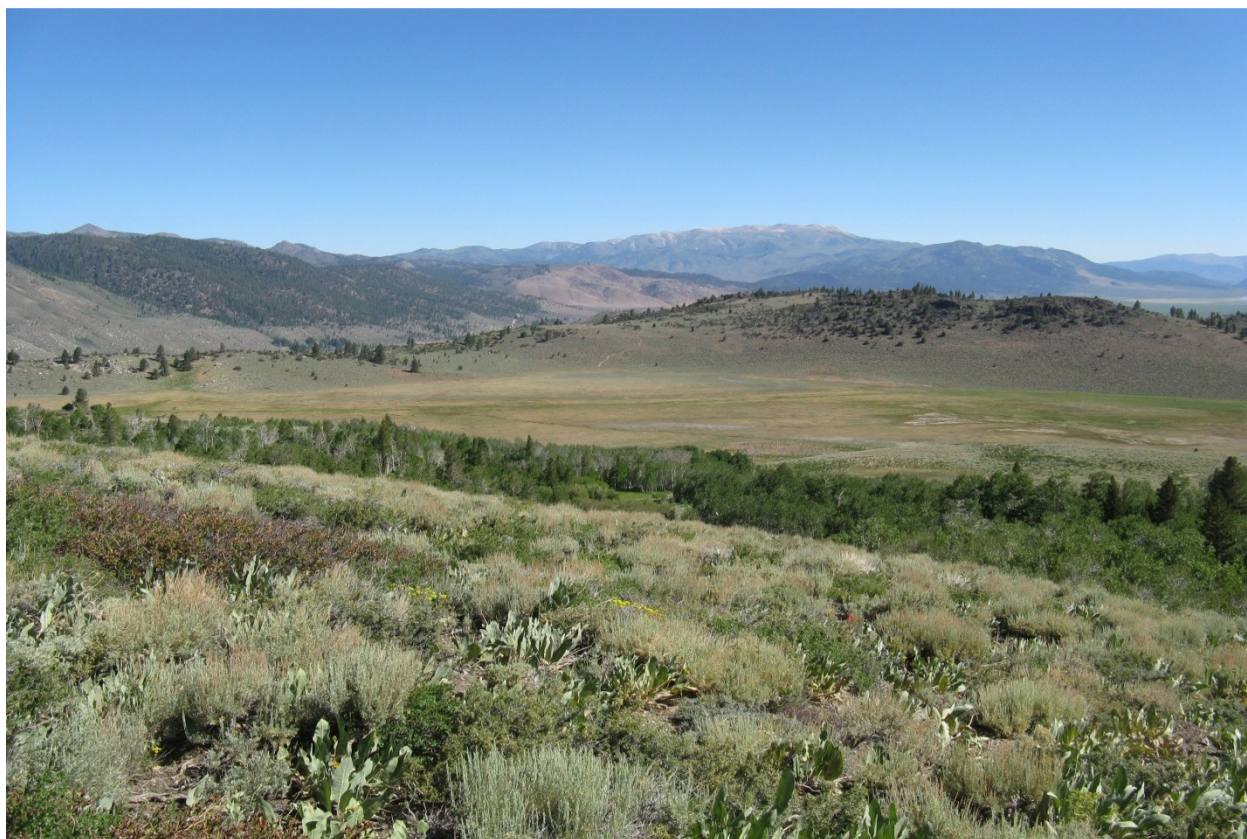




United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Public Scoping Notice

Bridgeport Southwest Rangeland Project



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INTRODUCTION

The Bridgeport Ranger District (BRD) is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) addressing livestock grazing on the Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg, Summers Meadow, and Tamarack grazing allotments in Mono County, California (Figure 1). This scoping notice provides project background, the purpose of the project, a summary of pertinent management direction, and a description of the proposed action. The purpose of this scoping period is to solicit comments that will help determine the scope of the issues to be addressed in the EA. The final section of the notice provides instruction for submitting comments.

BACKGROUND

An allotment is a designated area of land available for domestic livestock (cattle and/or sheep) grazing. The authorizing document for permitting livestock on an allotment is the term grazing permit. An allotment management plan (AMP) is the implementation document developed, with the livestock permittees, after a project-level analysis in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and associated decision to authorize grazing on the allotment is completed. The AMP describes how livestock are managed and includes information on pasture rotation, timing of grazing, water developments, fence installation and maintenance, forage use indicators, monitoring requirements, and desired conditions. Term grazing permits are modified to include AMPs as they are completed.

The Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg (including the Jordan Basin unit), Summers Meadow, and Tamarack allotments (project area) are located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the southwestern portion of the BRD (Figure 2). The project area covers approximately 22,926 acres. It was historically grazed by domestic sheep.

The project area includes a small amount of designated critical Sierra Nevada Bighorn Sheep (SNBS) habitat, which was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1999. At that time, the Forest Service began consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on domestic sheep grazing authorizations on these allotments to identify management options and operational controls to reduce the risk of contact and subsequent disease transmission between domestic sheep and SNBS.

The FWS SNBS Recovery Plan (2007) stated that disease transmission from domestic sheep and goat grazing poses one of the major threats to the recovery of SNBS. A risk assessment document (Baumer et.al. 2009) and an application document (Croft et al 2009, revised 2010) were prepared to provide specific guidance in determining which allotments are high-risk by providing a means to calculate a threshold value for the risk of contact. All of the project-area allotments were determined to be within the high/unacceptable risk area for contact between SNBS and domestic sheep.

The BRD and permittee engaged in cooperative planning that resulted in grazing authorizations for the allotments that contained multiple control measures to prevent contact between domestic sheep and SNBS. Initially the BRD recognized that owing to the gregarious nature of domestic sheep bands, they could be herded and were unlikely to scatter throughout the allotment, and so they prescribed which areas within the allotments could be grazed and when that grazing could occur. The permittee provided training and instructions to their employees that included detailed steps to be taken if SNBS approached the band of domestic sheep, or if sheep strayed from the band. No contact between SNBS and domestic sheep was recorded.

The grazing permits expired and were not reauthorized. This occurred on the Jordan Basin unit of the Dunderberg allotment in 2004 and on the remainder of the Dunderberg allotment in 2006, on the Summers Meadow allotment in 2005, and on the Cameron Canyon and Tamarack allotments in 2009. The sheep grazing permits for these allotments were subsequently cancelled, in 2010 on the Summers

Meadow allotment, and in 2014 on the Dunderberg, Cameron Canyon, and Tamarack allotments. The decision to cancel the permits was solely driven by the SNBS issue. Otherwise, desired conditions and objectives were being met, and the impacts of domestic sheep grazing on other resources were at acceptable levels.

In 2014, the permittee who had been operating on those allotments filed a suit against the BRD for damages sustained to their livestock production by the cancelling of those grazing permits. A 2015 settlement agreement between permittee and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, gave the permittee preference for cattle grazing permits on the Dunderberg, Cameron Canyon, and Tamarack allotments if an EA completed by the Forest Service supported conversion of the allotments from domestic sheep to cattle. The agreement also included a provision granting the permittee the right to submit a new application for domestic sheep permits for these allotments should such permits become available in the future (paragraph 3). The BRD included the Summers Meadow allotment in the analysis because it is an integral part of the proposed action.

NEED FOR ACTION

National Forest System land is an important source of livestock forage. Congress has made it clear through the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act and the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) that domestic livestock grazing is one of many activities that should be considered when balancing the multiple uses on National Forest System lands. Accordingly, the HTNF had issued permits to graze sheep on the Cameron Canyon, Dunderberg, Summers Meadow, and Tamarack allotments.

As discussed above under Background, the 2014 settlement agreement cancelled the sheep grazing permit on these allotments and provided the previous permittee the opportunity to apply for permits to graze cattle. The permittee has made that application. The need for action is to address that application.

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

Projects that take place on National Forest System lands are guided by the desired conditions, goals, objectives, management direction, and standards and guidelines set out in the forest plan specific to each national forest. The 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the Toiyabe National Forest, as amended by both the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) and the 2016 Greater Sage-grouse Bi-State Distinct Population Segment Forest Plan Amendment (Bi-State Amendment), embodies the provisions of NFMA, its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents.

The Toiyabe was divided into 12 management areas to facilitate implementation of the LRMP. The project area includes parts of two management areas: #4 Walker, which prescribes riparian area protection, and #5 Existing Wilderness, which allows for livestock grazing in wilderness areas according to the provisions of 36 CFR 293. Details of LRMP Forest-wide and management area-specific direction are in the project record and will be in resource-specific analyses in the EA.

The Toiyabe LRMP and SNFPA specify that AMPs be developed for livestock grazing allotments. AMPs would be prepared for these allotments based on this analysis and the subsequent decision reached by the District Ranger.

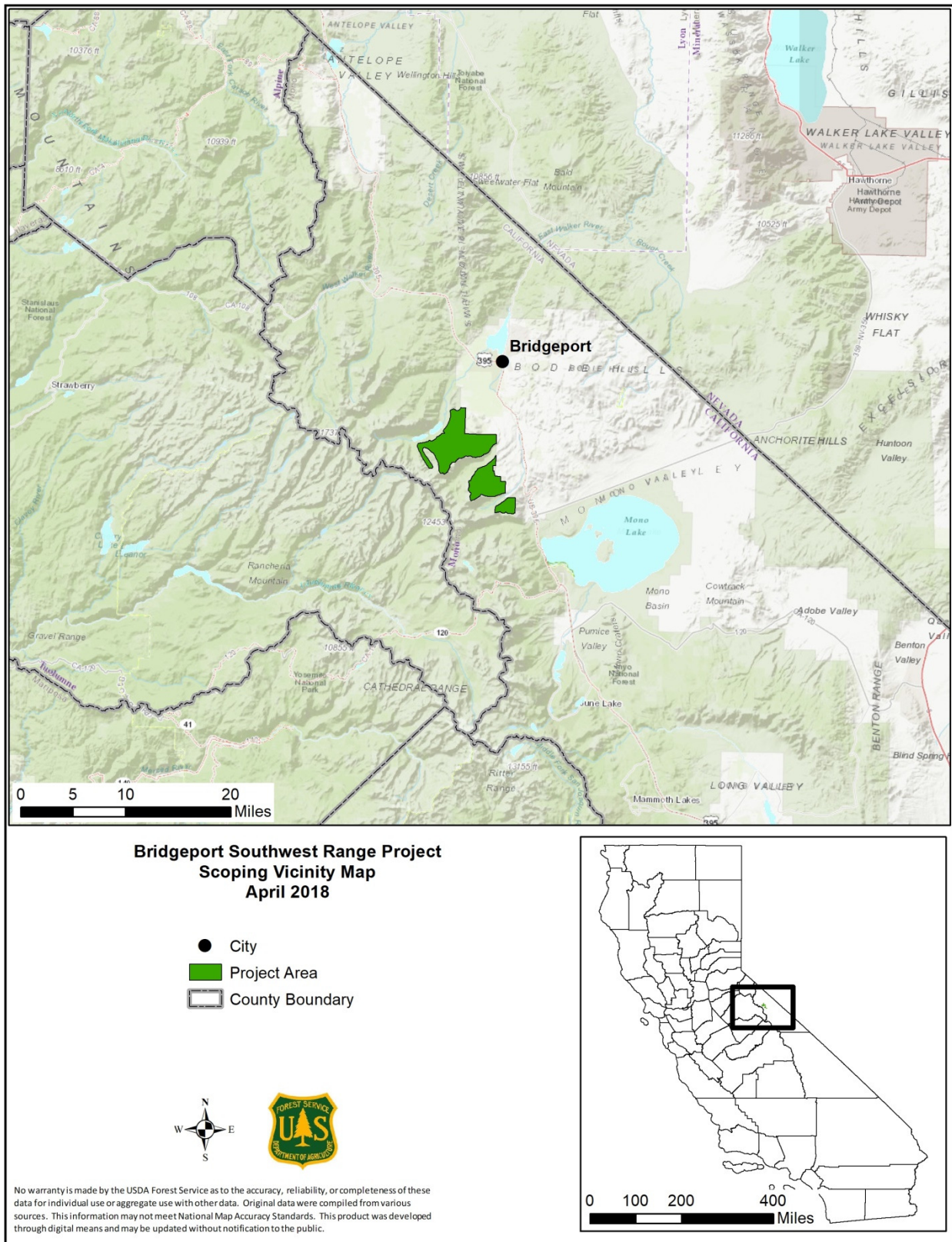


Figure 1. Vicinity map.

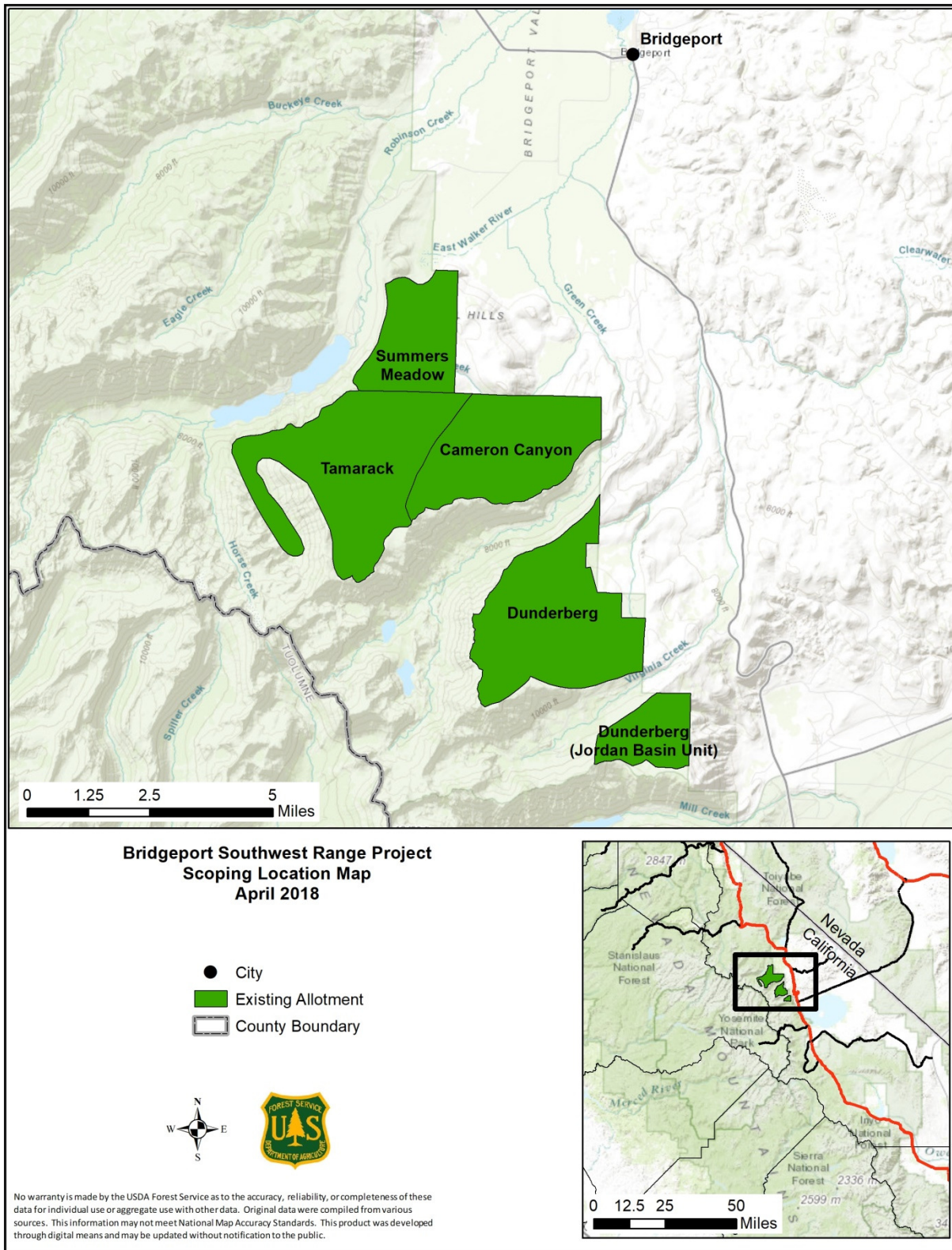


Figure 2. Location map.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action was developed to meet the need for the Bridgeport Southwest Rangeland Project stated above.

The proposed action is to authorize cattle grazing within portions of the Dunderberg, Tamarack, Cameron Canyon, and Summers Meadow allotments and to stipulate the management actions, terms, and conditions under which cattle grazing would be permitted. It incorporates the ability to adjust grazing use and strategies to meet variable forage and resource conditions within the confines of the permit terms and conditions. The proposed action includes parameters to be used by the Forest Service and the permittee to measure and assess the effectiveness of grazing management toward maintaining or achieving desired conditions.

The Proposed Action would include these four basic components, which are described in detail below and illustrated in Figure 3.

1. Modify allotment boundaries and pasture configuration.
2. Provide livestock grazing flexibility within the limits of permit terms and conditions.
3. Construct or reconstruct livestock grazing infrastructure.
4. Employ monitoring to verify adherence to proper-use criteria and maintenance of or progression toward desired conditions.

MODIFY ALLOTMENT BOUNDARIES AND PASTURE CONFIGURATION

The northern boundary of the Summers Meadow allotment would be shifted south, reducing the allotment by roughly half, and the Summers Meadow, Cameron Canyon and Tamarack allotments would be combined into a single Cameron Canyon allotment. Within the new Cameron Canyon allotment, pastures would be created that correspond to the old allotment boundaries (i.e., Summers Meadow pasture, Cameron Canyon pasture, Tamarack pasture). The Dunderberg and Jordan Basin unit would be managed as two pastures in the Dunderberg allotment.

Where possible, the amount of new pasture boundary fences needed would be reduced by taking advantage of topographic features or other natural barriers. The permittee may employ herding as a substitute for fencing in some cases.

These modifications would reduce the size of the proposed Cameron Canyon and Dunderberg allotments by approximately 4,896 acres, resulting in a new project area approximately 18,030 acres in size.

PROVIDE LIVESTOCK GRAZING FLEXIBILITY

As described previously, the project area has not been grazed by livestock since 2009, and when it was grazed, sheep were the permitted livestock. Cattle have never been permitted on these allotments. As a result, converting the allotments to cattle grazing will require new management strategies. An initial calculation has been made to determine the occupancy rates, but that rate and other aspects of the grazing management strategy may need to be adjusted as both the permittee and BRD learn the most effective and appropriate way to manage cattle grazing in this setting. As a result, the proposed action would authorize flexible occupancy rates, season of use, and grazing management strategies as described below.



Occupancy Rates

As a conservative measure, the initial and maximum occupancy rates that would be permitted were developed using NRCS soil survey forage-production figures for “unfavorable” and “normal” years, respectively. The NRCS figures were adjusted for hillslope gradient, distance from water, or other access-limiting factors in each allotment to determine the amount of forage available for cattle grazing and the initial occupancy rates (Table 1). These rates would be the starting point on the grazing permits. Adjustments would be made based on range condition and trend, proper-use criteria, and actual-use monitoring. In “above normal years,” as defined by the NRCS, the grazing season could be initiated 2 weeks sooner or extended 2 weeks later (FSH 2209.21, Ch. 10, Section 16.1.4). Such an extension would increase the permitted head months (i.e., one month’s use and occupancy of the range by one cow/calf pair).

Table 1. Proposed grazing use.					
Grazing Allotment	Initial Permitted Use	Target Permitted Use	Season of Use	Miles of Fence	Water Developments
Cameron Canyon	484 HM*	815 HM	May 15-Oct 31	9	0
Dunderberg	316 HM	478 HM	May 15-Oct 31	13	2
Total	800 HM	1293 HM		22	2
*HM - Head month - one month’s use and occupancy of the range by one cow/calf pair.					

Season of Use

In addition, flexibility would be incorporated into the actual season of use. The overall permitted season would be from May 15 to October 31. Normally, actual use would be only 2 to 3 months within that period, but the permittee would have the flexibility to graze more cattle for a shorter season, or fewer cattle for a longer season, as long as permitted number of head months was not exceeded. This flexibility is intended to match actual use with on-the-ground conditions which may vary from year to year, and to maximize the potential for meeting desired conditions. The flexible season of use would also allow for the permittee to schedule grazing on the project area to fit with their overall livestock operation.

Grazing Management Strategies

The allotments would be grazed under a simple deferred or rest rotation strategy. Adjustments would be made as necessary to the timing, intensity, and duration of grazing use to attain desired conditions. Strategies would be designed to incorporate the following guidelines:

- Do not graze any one pasture twice in the same grazing season.
- Vary the time of year livestock are in any one unit over several years.
- Provide periodic rest when possible.
- Limit the amount of time cattle are in any area so as to minimize impacts of grazing regrowth.
- Provide adequate time for growth prior to grazing or for regrowth after livestock have been removed.
- Do not allow for multiple entries into a given pasture within a season unless necessary for trailing.

CONSTRUCT OR RECONSTRUCT LIVESTOCK GRAZING INFRASTRUCTURE

The allotments have 8 miles of existing fence that would be kept or reconstructed. Up to 14 miles of additional boundary fence would be constructed around the perimeter of the allotments (Figure 3). As with interior pasture fences, the amount of fence constructed would be minimized by using topography or other natural features boundaries where possible. Until boundary and pasture fences were constructed, the permittee could use range riders to manage cattle distribution and to verify that proper use is met.

Two existing but poorly functioning water developments would be reconstructed to provide reliable stock watering points that would be located outside of riparian areas. One is on the southern end of the Dunderberg pasture, and one is in the Jordan Basin pasture.

Two cattleguards would be installed on County Road 20 where the road crosses the northeast and south boundaries of the Dunderberg pasture. These cattleguards would allow vehicular traffic to flow on County Road 20 while preventing cattle drifting around the boundary fence. Either two gates or one cattleguard and an additional mile of fence would be installed along Forest Service Road 144 near Summers Creek and between the old boundary separating Summers Meadow and Cameron Canyon.

MONITORING, PROPER-USE CRITERIA, AND DESIRED CONDITIONS

Monitoring

Monitoring has the dual purpose of 1) ensuring compliance with the terms and conditions of the permit and proper-use criteria for an allotment, and 2) determining whether the current management of the allotment is maintaining or moving the allotments toward desired condition. Both the implementation and effectiveness aspects of monitoring are critical to determine when or if management changes should be made as described above in the description of flexibility, and to guide the direction that those changes take.

The frequency and intensity of monitoring on each allotment may vary over time. Monitoring would initially be completed yearly, though it may be less frequent once the BRD was satisfied that the permit terms and conditions were being implemented, that proper-use criteria were being met, and that the project area was maintaining or progressing toward desired conditions. Occupancy rates, season of use, or pasture deferment patterns would be adjusted the following year if desired conditions were not being met. If each pasture cannot be monitored for range readiness before grazing is initiated, that determination may be made based on the results of monitoring similar vegetation at similar elevation elsewhere in the area.

Proper-use Criteria

The Intermountain Region Rangeland Ecosystem Analysis and Monitoring Handbook (FSH 2209.21, Ch. Zero Code) defines proper-use criteria as the: "...limiting factor or factors which will be measured on a particular site to determine if the site has been properly used. It could be residual forage, impact on other resources or uses, or any other measurable factor on a particular site."

The factors that would be measured to assess proper use for this project are percent utilization of upland species (measured at the end of the grazing season), stubble height of riparian species, and extent of disturbance of streambanks and shorelines. As defined in the Toiyabe LRMP, disturbance to banks and shorelines includes bank sloughing, chiseling, trampling, and other means of exposing bare soil or cutting plant roots.

Both the Toiyabe LRMP and the SNFPA allow for the adjustment of stubble heights and utilization levels based on range condition and/or ecological status. Utilization levels would be set based on the current

condition of riparian and upland sites. Over time, the levels would be adjusted in response to changes in current conditions.

Meadow Areas

According to SNFPA, grazing would be managed to leave a 4-inch stubble height in meadows that are in Functioning (late seral) condition or a 6-inch stubble height in meadows that are in Functioning at Risk (early seral) condition. Degraded meadows (Non-Functioning) receive total rest from grazing.

Riparian Areas

The SNFPA limits utilization of woody riparian species to 20 percent. Disturbance to streambanks and natural lake and pond shorelines is limited to 20 percent of the stream reach or natural lake and pond shorelines. The Bi-State Amendment directs that utilization on herbaceous and shrub species be less than 35 percent in riparian and wet meadow habitats.

Upland Areas

The Toiyabe LRMP limits livestock utilization of herbaceous species in Functioning upland sagebrush and mountain brush sites to 45 percent. Utilization is limited to 35 percent on upland sites classified as Functioning at Risk and 10 percent on sites classified as Non-Functioning. Utilization of woody upland species, such as sagebrush, aspen and bitterbrush, is limited to 40 percent in Functioning sites, 30 percent in Functioning at Risk sites, and 20 percent in Non-Functioning sites. The Bi-State Amendment directs that utilization on shrubs be less than 35 percent in upland sagebrush habitats, and that utilization on herbaceous species be less than 45 percent (mountain big sagebrush communities) or 35 percent (black sagebrush, Wyoming and basin big sagebrush communities).

DESIRED CONDITIONS

The desired conditions for the Dunderberg and Cameron Canyon allotments will be:

1. Rangelands will be in satisfactory condition (1986 LRMP p., IV-4).
2. Riparian areas and meadows will be in late seral condition (2004 SNFPA, p. 42).
3. Rangelands in the project area that provide Bi-State greater sage-grouse habitat will meet the desired habitat conditions at the landscape scale (Bi-State Amendment p. 37-38).

SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL ISSUES

An initial phase of NEPA review is identification of issues, defined as resource impacts or unresolved resource management conflicts that may occur through implementation of the proposed action. Some issues are identified through internal, interdisciplinary review of a proposed action is developed, others through scoping comments and other public input.

Often issues can be addressed and either minimized or eliminated through adjustments to the proposed action. Those that cannot be adequately addressed through such adjustments may trigger development of an alternative to the proposed action to reduce or eliminate the impact or conflict.

The statements below are based on preliminary internal review and identify potential resource issues related to this proposed action. These issues, in addition to those generated through public comment, will be fully developed, analyzed, and discussed in the environmental assessment.

SOILS AND WATERSHED

Livestock grazing may affect soil and watershed health in several ways. Trampling may affect soil productivity by compacting the soil. Loss of effective ground cover in upland areas may increase overland

flow and soil erosion. Loss of ground cover and plant vigor in riparian areas can decrease their ability to filter pollutants and function as a floodplain. Livestock grazing may impact water quality by altering streambank stability or nutrient loading. The project area includes some erosive soil types, steep slopes, and several streams and associated riparian areas and meadows.

VEGETATION

There are no known occurrences of threatened and endangered plants in the project area, though there are occurrences of whitebark pine, a Forest Service sensitive species and candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act. There are no substantial infestations of noxious weeds in the project area, though some weeds are present near roadways. Invasive annual grasses are also present in some low-elevation areas. Livestock grazing may affect special-status plant species, the distribution of noxious weeds, and the composition of native plant communities.

TERRESTRIAL WILDLIFE

Livestock grazing may affect terrestrial wildlife populations or their associated habitat. Livestock grazing has the potential to transmit disease from cattle to SNBS, and portions of the Dunderberg allotment are included in designated critical habitat. The project area also provides nesting habitat for bi-state greater sage-grouse and lies within 4-mile lek buffer zones. However, there are no known leks in the project area. The project area also includes potential habitat for flammulated owl, northern goshawk, bald eagle, great gray owl, willow flycatcher, mountain quail, American marten, Townsend's western big-eared bat, spotted bat.

FISHERIES AND AMPHIBIANS

No special-status fish species occur in the project area, though there are populations of brook, rainbow, and brown trout. There is no occupied Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog or Yosemite toad habitat in the project area, though potential habitat is present for both species. Livestock grazing may affect fish or amphibian wildlife populations or their associated habitats directly or via water-quality effects.

RECREATION

Livestock grazing has the potential to affect recreation in the project area. Recreation uses include developed and dispersed camping, hiking, hunting, and OHV travel. Potential effects include seeing livestock, encountering impacts from livestock grazing such as excrement, trailing, beds, and livestock wandering into campgrounds and other sites. There is potential for OHV users to encounter livestock as they travel on motorized routes. The project area is adjacent to the highly used Twin Lakes area and the Virginia Lakes area. Both of these areas have campgrounds, recreational residences, and commercial recreation businesses.

DESIGNATED WILDERNESS AND INVENTORIED ROADLESS AREAS

The project area includes a portion of the Hoover Wilderness. Livestock grazing, where established prior to the effective date of the Wilderness Act (September 1964), is permitted subject to reasonable regulations. Livestock grazing may affect wilderness character.

Livestock grazing may also affect the roadless characteristics of Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs). The project area includes portions of the Hoover Cattle Creek, Hoover Green Creek North, Hoover Virginia Lakes, and Hoover Mt. Olsen IRAs. No new temporary or permanent roads would be constructed under the proposed action.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

The project area does not include any resources listed on the National Register of Historic Places. There is a prehistoric game trap, a boulder with bedrock mortars, and several lithic scatters. Relics of historic livestock grazing such as discarded ovens in sheep camp sites and arborglyphs are also present. Livestock grazing may affect cultural resources through compaction of soils, reduced vegetation, and trampling, which can increase soil erosion that transports artifacts away from sites. Artifacts may be broken, and archaeological features can be trampled, compacted, and scattered.

TRIBAL RESOURCES

Livestock grazing may affect resources of special interest and areas of importance to local Tribes and Tribal members. The Forest will work with local Tribal councils to identify resources of interest and areas of importance as the analysis progresses.

COMMENT PROCESS

The Forest Service encourages your comments on the issues and alternatives to be addressed in this EA, along with supporting reasons that the responsible official should consider in determining the scope of the analysis.

Your comments will help us focus this environmental assessment on the real environmental issues associated with this proposed action. The assessment will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. In addition to the proposed action, a no-action (no grazing) alternative will also be analyzed in the environmental assessment. Any additional alternatives suggested by public scoping comments will also be considered for inclusion in the analysis.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this proposed action must be submitted by June 7, 2018.

Comments can be uploaded to the “Comments/Objection on Project” section of the project website at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=49993> under “get connected.” Electronic comments can also be submitted via E-mail: comments-intermtn-humboldt-toiyabe-bridgeport@fs.fed.us.

Electronic comments should be submitted using plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and/or Word (.doc). Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

Written comments can also be submitted to: Leeann Murphy, Acting District Ranger, Bridgeport Ranger District, HC 62 Box 1000, Bridgeport, CA, 93517. Fax 760-932-5899. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are: 8am to 4:30pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to object must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only those who submit timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed action during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection under §218.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information contact Aaron Coogan, Project Manager at (760) 932-5852 or accoogan@fs.fed.us.

NEXT STEPS

Work will continue on the EA. The BRD is currently completing a NFMA analysis to compare current conditions with desired conditions. That comparison will be used to identify whether there are portions of the project area not meeting desired conditions. It will also be used to inform and further develop the proposed action so that cattle grazing may occur in a manner that either maintains or progresses toward meeting desired conditions.

If, as the analysis progresses, no potential for significant impacts is identified, that finding along with the EA and a proposed decision will be sent to those who commented during this scoping period. If the analysis concludes that there is the potential for significant impacts, then an environmental impact statement will be prepared.

The public will next have an opportunity to comment on the project when the notice of the proposed action is published, and then again when the EA and draft decision are published.

Thank you for your existing interest and involvement in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The Forest Service is transitioning to a web based electronic mailing system that allows all interested parties to receive project material (scoping documents, updates, draft and final NEPA documents, and decisions) by email. This new system gives you direct control over which mailing lists you are subscribed to and immediate electronic access to project documents as they are posted online.

To subscribe to this new system you may go online now to migrate to electronic notifications, by following this link: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=49993> . Once at the project site you will see a box titled “Get Connected” on the right hand side of the page. In the box is a “Subscribe to Email Updates” menu item. When you click on that item you will be prompted to provide your email address and select a pass word. When you have logged in you will be able to manage your account by subscribing to projects by Forest, District, project type, or project purpose. You will also be able to change your email address and password, or delete subscriptions for projects you no longer wish to follow or which have been completed. Once you are subscribed your name will be removed from the existing postal mailing lists.